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**NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY**

**NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE**

**THE BATTLE OF WILLIAMSPORT, 12-13 JULY 1863:**

**MEADE'S DESTRUCTION OF THE ARMY OF NORTHERN VIRGINIA**

**LTC MIKE BEASOCK/CLASS OF 1998**

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**FACULTY SEMINAR LEADER:  
Dr. David Rosenberg**

**FACULTY ADVISOR:  
Col J. Sullivan**

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## **The Battle of Williamsport, 12-13 July 1863: Meade's Destruction of the Army of Northern Virginia**

*General Meade has defeated the rebels at Gettysburg, PA and followed them close to this point when we were in a condition that would be an impossibility to gain a victory over the rebels. . . . don't let the people meddle with Meade and he is all right, and will end the rebellion this fall, but if they begin to clamor about not bagging Lee's whole army. WE ARE GONE. This clamor of the people is just what destroys the spirits of the soldier, for it leads them to think as the people do, and subsequently brings on difficulty at Washington. Genl. Hooker said that he had more to contend with at Washington than at any of the battles of his army. Stand by Meade and we are safe.*

Letter from Lt Kelly to his father, dated July 14, 1863 near Boonesboro.

"Once the defender has gained an important advantage," Clausewitz wrote, "defense as such has done its work." Now it is time for ". . . a sudden powerful transition to the offensive—the flashing sword of vengeance."<sup>1</sup>

The thesis of this paper is that General Meade could have, indeed should have, destroyed the Army of Northern Virginia as it retreated South following its defeat at Gettysburg. Decisively engaging and destroying Lee's army in the vicinity of Williamsport, Maryland, combined with the surrender of Vicksburg, would have undoubtedly ended the Civil War. Instead, Lee was allowed to retreat unscathed and the war was prolonged for two more two years.

This paper further argues that had Meade possessed what Clausewitz describes as "*coup d'oeil*," he would have immediately realized the significance of the moment and relentlessly pursued and destroyed the Army of Northern Virginia, and along with it the Confederacy, in a major, climatic battle. His cautiousness—his "quest for certainty"—prevented such a battle from occurring.

Pronouncing judgment over historical events is something never to be lightly undertaken, especially when, as in this case, the events are controversial. The intent of this paper is to explore whether it was feasible for Meade to successfully

pursue and decisively engage Lee and, if so, to better understand Meade's failure to do so. This discussion of what might be aptly described as "the commander's inward eye" is as relevant today as it was in July 1863. The battlefield commander who is both decisive and intuitive will seize opportunities to gain or regain the initiative and ultimately defeat his opponent. Difficult to gain but easily lost, the ability to seize the initiative during a battle or campaign often has been the difference between victory and defeat.<sup>2</sup>

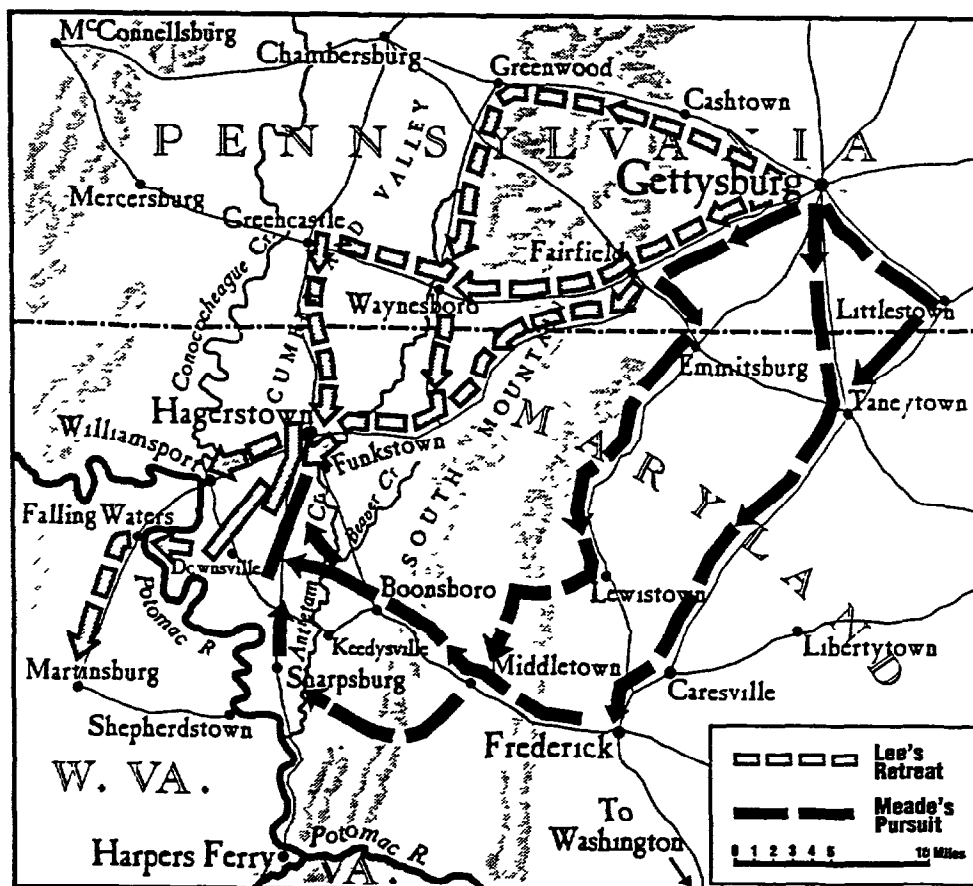
### **Lee's Retreat and Meade's Pursuit**

The Gettysburg Battle cost Lee's army about 28,000 casualties, and with such losses, the offensive capacity of the Army of Northern Virginia was virtually eliminated. Throughout the evening of 3 July 1863 Lee's forces worked to form a defensive line against an expected Union counterattack. But Meade did not immediately attack and for that, his lack of aggressiveness has been criticized down the years.

Lee's army began their retreat to Virginia in the rain on July 4<sup>th</sup>. In the words of Josiah Gorgas, Chief of Confederate Ordnance, "Yesterday we rode on the pinnacle of success—today absolute ruin seems to be our portion. The Confederacy totters to its destruction." Lincoln, it appears, also believed that the Gettysburg victory had set the Confederacy tottering, stating on July 7<sup>th</sup>—"If General Meade can complete his work . . . by the literal or substantial destruction of Lee's army, the rebellion will be over."<sup>3</sup>

Despite the horrendous losses in men and material on both sides at Gettysburg, the Confederate army and the Army of the Potomac remained effective

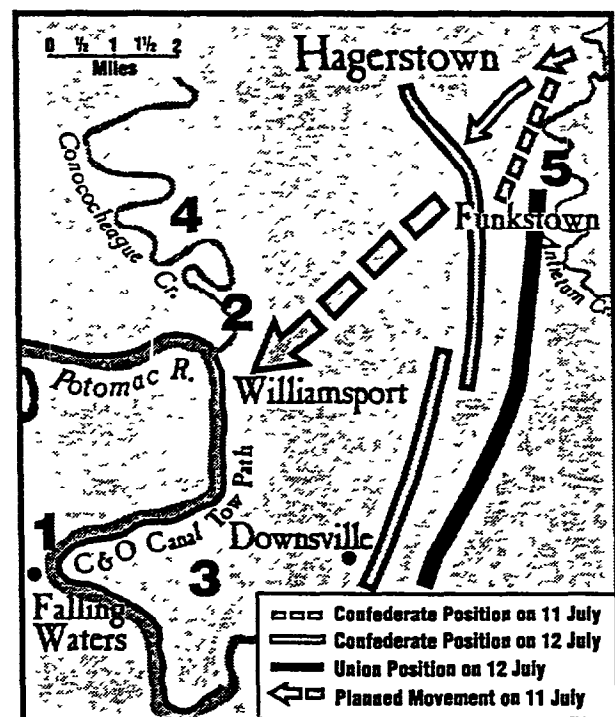
fighting forces. Meade's army, however, possessed the superior strength and had the capability of delivering the *coup de grace* and to complete the destruction of Lee's army. After the defeat of Pickett's Charge, it appears that Meade's thoughts immediately turned to the offense. Given the overall condition of the Union army, however, Meade decided not to immediately counterattack but instead to maneuver through Middletown, across South Mountain and to Williamsport, Maryland (note Map 1). Meade's intent was to intercept Lee along his anticipated line of retreat.<sup>4</sup> As the topography on Map 1 indicates, this was Meade's only sensible option to pursue Lee. A critical constraint to Union maneuver was that of protecting Washington.



Map 1. Area of Operations.

Meade verified Lee's retreat on July 5<sup>th</sup> and the Army of the Potomac began its pursuit on July 6<sup>th</sup>. Meade anticipated that a major engagement would occur at the Potomac River crossings at Falling Waters and Williamsport (sites #1 and #2 respectively, Map 2). If Lee's Army crossed the Potomac first, then Meade would find himself on the exposed side of a "defensive box" (site #3 on the map). Protected from the north and west by the Conococheague Creek (site #4), Lee's army would be secure from any attempt by Meade to outflank him. Success for Meade then, was a matter of timing—of moving rapidly, concentrating, and attacking Lee while his army was divided across the Potomac.

While Lee, in the truest Jominian sense, was operating on interior lines throughout his retreat from Gettysburg, it was not without difficulty. Rains made the Potomac River unfordable and a Union cavalry raid had destroyed the pontoon bridge at Falling Waters.<sup>5</sup> Despite Meade's two-day lag in moving his army south, this turn of events provided Meade with the chance to decisively close with Lee. By July 10<sup>th</sup> Meade had concentrated his army in a defensive posture along the Antietam and Beaver creeks and secured his right



**Map 2. Situation 12 July 1863**

flank with two divisions of cavalry (site #5). He crept forward deliberately, continually emphasizing caution in his dispatches to General Halleck.<sup>6</sup> In his "quest for certainty," Meade kept the bulk of his army stationary on July 11<sup>th</sup> while continuing to screen with his cavalry. It was not until July 12<sup>th</sup> that Meade moved his army forward into line facing the Confederates (Map 2). That evening Meade convened his generals for a Council of War. The consensus was to delay for a "more careful examination of the enemy's position, strength, and defensive works."<sup>7</sup> When the Union army finally moved forward on July 14<sup>th</sup>, they found nothing but Lee's rear guard.

### **The Feasibility of Decisive Battle**

Could Meade have attacked and destroyed Lee's army while it was astride the Potomac River at Williamsport? Given Meade's concept of operations and concentration of forces, it is entirely possible that the Union army would have been successful had it moved into line on July 11<sup>th</sup> and attacked on the 12<sup>th</sup> –as opposed to waiting until the 14<sup>th</sup>. "A Union movement at that time would *not* have been premature and would have entailed entirely *acceptable risk* based on Meade's knowledge of enemy positions and intentions."<sup>8</sup> Meade could have taken full advantage of Ewell's withdrawal south from the Funkstown area. His "window of opportunity," albeit only 2 days, occurred as the Confederate army's left (northern) flank had been pulled back to the area around Williamsport with the remainder of the army astride the Potomac at the Falling Waters crossing.

A plausible scenario would have been a main attack consisting of four corps launching from positions south of Funkstown toward Ewell's corps in Williamsport. The objective would have been the securing of the Williamsport fording site (site # 2, Map 2). An additional corps, held in reserve, would have been available should the attack lose momentum or, preferably, to exploit success and attack further south across the Potomac. In the south, two corps and a cavalry division would have conducted a probing attack against the Confederates in the Downsville area with the intent to distract and confuse Lee. These forces would then form a defense to secure the Union left (southern) flank. On the right (northern) flank, the bulk of the Union cavalry would have been positioned to protect against likely counterattack by Lee's cavalry.

With the Potomac restricting Lee's maneuver to the flanks and a single, hastily constructed pontoon bridge at Falling Waters to his rear, Lee would have been forced either to remain on the defensive or to conduct a frontal attack akin to Pickett's disastrous charge. After consolidating at the Williamsport crossing, the Union main effort would continue on the south side of the Potomac toward Falling Waters. Confederates trapped in the Downsville salient would either have surrendered or been annihilated by Union forces attacking from multiple directions. This hypothetical scenario, in all likelihood, could have succeeded and Lee's army would have been destroyed (as opposed to being defeated). However, such a maneuver, worthy of Lee himself, would have entailed a significant degree of risk.



## Analysis – What Can We Learn From Meade?

War is the realm of uncertainty, three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser certainty

Carl von Clausewitz, On War

The premise of this paper is that despite relative superiority, Meade's failure to successfully pursue and decisively engage Lee's army was the result of Meade's excessive cautiousness—his quest for certainty. The focus of this analysis, therefore, concerns the phenomenon of *uncertainty* in battle. Exploring uncertainty from a theoretical perspective provides, perhaps, the most useful insight as to why the Battle of Williamsport did not occur.

To caricature Clausewitz's famous dictum on strategy, the best system of command is to always have a *genius* in charge, first in general, and then at the decisive point. While this may be sound in principle, this advice is less than useful in practice. The problem is the inability of military institutions to produce a steady supply of geniuses or in identifying the decisive points into which, once available, they should be put!<sup>9</sup>

The history of command in war consists essentially of an endless quest for certainty—certainty about the state and intentions of the enemy's forces, certainty about the manifold factors that together constitute the environment in which war is fought such as weather and terrain, and lastly, certainty about the state, intentions, and activities of one's own forces. Certainty is perhaps best conceptualized as the product of two factors: 1) the amount of information available for decision making and 2) the nature of the task to be performed. Everything else being equal, large and more complex tasks require more information to carry them out. Conversely,

when information is insufficient, not timely, overabundant, or when it is false, then a fall in performance will accordingly ensue.

In his book Command in War, Martin Van Creveld wrote that "the history of war can thus be understood in terms of a race between the demand for information and the ability of command systems to meet it. That race is internal; it takes place within every military organization, at all levels and at all times."<sup>10</sup>

In view of the tremendous developments in modern command and control systems, one might wonder if the *race for certainty* is significantly different today than it was for General Meade in July of 1863 as he pondered whether or not to attack Lee. The answer appears to be a resounding no. "Taken as a whole," Creveld writes, "present-day military forces, for all the imposing array of electronic gadgetry at their disposal, give no evidence whatsoever of being more capable of dealing with the information needed for the command process than were their predecessors a century or even a millennium ago."<sup>11</sup>

Despite the many advances in technology as well as revolutions in organization and doctrine, the ability to approach certainty has not improved markedly. The dictum that "a great part of information obtained in war is contradictory, a still greater part false, and by far the greatest part is uncertain" remains as true today as it was when it was written by Clausewitz, against the background of incomparably simpler circumstances, over a hundred and fifty years ago.<sup>12</sup>

In order to attain certainty, a commander such as Meade would require all of the relevant information. But the more available the information is, the longer the

time that is needed to process it, and the greater the danger of failing to distinguish between the relevant and the irrelevant, the important and the unimportant, the reliable and the unreliable, the true and the false. There appears to be no way out of this self-defeating dilemma except what Napoleon called “a superior understanding” – one based on training, practice and experience, but ultimately relying no less on rational calculation than on intuitive judgment.<sup>13</sup>

Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote that the need for certainty as the basis for decision-making in war was “the great snare of the mere engineer.”<sup>14</sup> A grasp of sound principles, conversely, could provide “the vivid inspiration that enables its happy possessor, at critical moments, to see and follow the bright clear line, which, like a ray of light at midnight, shining among manifold doubtful indications, guides his steps.”<sup>15</sup> Mahan also asserted that “. . . for success in war, the indispensable complement of intellectual grasp and insight is a moral power, which enables a man to trust the inner light—to have faith—a power which dominates hesitation, and sustains action, in the most tremendous emergencies.”<sup>16</sup> Mahan knew that in war, the faculty of judgment had to be paired with will in order to overcome timidity that would delay or prevent action. The synthesis of judgment and will was *intelligent emotion*, or in a word, *intuition*.

When degrees of uncertainty and danger were extremely high, such as Meade faced in pursuing Lee’s army, extraordinary intuition was required to promote rapid and decisive command that transcended mere assertion of judgment to become creative performance, or in other words, an *artistic act*.<sup>17</sup> Correspondingly,

Clauswitz wrote in On War that “if the mind is to emerge unscathed from this relentless struggle with the unforeseen, two qualities are indispensable: first an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth; and second, the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead.” Meade, it appears, lacked these two qualities. The first of these qualities is best described by the term *coup d’oeil*—the concept of a rapid and accurate decision—and the second by determination.

### **Conclusion**

General Meade could have, and indeed should have, destroyed the Army of Northern Virginia as it retreated following its defeat at Gettysburg. It was entirely feasible for Meade to decisively engage Lee’s army in the vicinity of Williamsport, Maryland, 12-13 July 1863. The relentless struggle with uncertainty in battle is as relevant today as it was in July 1863. Conceptual frameworks such as Mahan’s intuition and Clausewitz’s *coup d’oeil*—“the commander’s inward eye”—provide insights into Meade’s failure to take rapid and decisive action. What Meade and others offer us today are opportunities to study historical events to improve upon our own intuition.

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<sup>12</sup> Clausewitz, Vol 1 , p 75

<sup>13</sup> Creveld, p 267.

<sup>14</sup> Captain A T Mahan, The Life of Nelson. The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain, 1897, Little Brown Press Boston, p 129

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